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ABSTRACT

According to Lawrence Chua, "zines" are "xeroxed broadsides" which "make marginality their starting point, empowering voices excluded from the slicker journals." According to "Ms," they are "downsized stapled rags...often defiantly tasteless." A subgenre of zines, "Grrrl zines" are those written, produced, and distributed by young women, usually those of the 20-something generation and younger. Swearing, obscenities, scandalous, provocative language are important elements in the arsenal the grrrl zines throw at the mainstream window from their fringe. Their statements of purpose say, in essence, that they exist to give young women a voice, to find others, to build community, to reassure and be reassured. Exhorting women to "do something?" is an element of almost all the grrrl zines. Feminist in their orientation, zines are very critical of mainstream magazines such as "Sassy," which they maintain are not sassy at all but sexist and oppressive in their ideas about who women should be. Of Sassy, "Riot Grrrl NYC" writes, "their format of visuals is the same as all other magazines with a female audience--thin, very attractive models." It is a genre that empowers, but the possibility of incorporating it into writing courses is limited because it is too forceful and intense for the classroom. To tame its conventions would be to coopt its intensity and power. (Contains a selective list of zines and sources for zines.) (TB)

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Joan Livingston-Webber
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How Sassy are Grrrl Zines?

> I remember walking when I was young in the hills behind our Wisconsin farm and coming across the old deserted Snyder house in some forgotten valley. I was surprised to find the large living room window still intact. I did, of course, what any young boy is supposed to do. I found a rock and threw it through the window. The sound of the breaking glass, although frightening, brought pleasure, marking my presence. So it is with genres. (Peckham)

I'll be talking about the genre of zines, zines--from "fanzine," itself a back-formation from "magazine."[1] And I'll be focussing in on grrrl-zines, that's "g-r-r-r-l," with a visual "grrrr." Shortly, I'll distribute copies of a zine to you so you can distract yourselves from the boring parts of my talk.

Before the session convener gives you your zine copy, let me briefly describe what zines are, using succinct descriptions already available elsewhere. They are "xeroxed broadsides" which "make marginality their starting point, empowering voices excluded from the slicker journals" (Chua). They are "the

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magazine equivalent to public access television," this misleading description from the New York Times (Messinger). They are "downsized stapled rags," "an underworld of renegade publications," "often defiantly tasteless," an approving description from Ms (Austin). They are "do-it-yourself magazines that usually express attitudes of a group of people on the fringe who reject mainstream popular culture," from a review of the zine KAWA (Korean American Women with Attitude) in Amerasia Journal (Ha).

To produce a zine, one or more people, usually 20-something and younger, gather together over iced cappachino and a common passion (aka "topic"). Topics range from eight-track tape preservation to fights at hockey games. The passions range from hating Brenda (from "90210") to idolizing Doris Day. The agendas range from education about rape to reassurance about mutual perceptions to the taking of collective vengeance. These people then print, write, type, or word process about their topic or passion, do cut and paste layouts to creatively arrange segments of text and graphics in visual space, go to Kinko's and run off copies, and then mail out the zine on request for an SASE and a buck or for a zine in trade or for other "interesting stuff."

If an utterance is bar-coded, it's not a zine. Nor are zines particularly careful to cite the bar code from which a quote originates. The grrrl zines I've looked at, about 60 of them, are very literate. I think all of these zine makers must have feminist mothers who are writing teachers: They misspell

often, but when they use quotation marks, they're used--not to quote or to emphasize--but to undermine. These grrrls' literacy marginalizes them only, perhaps, by being very much like our own.

While the session convener passes out the zines to you, I'll continue with an important caveat here. If you have an aversion to swearing, obscenities, to vulgar, foul-mouthed language, especially from the likes of 16-year old grrrls, don't open your zine--and maybe stopper your ears. I'll be describing why grrrls write and circulate their zines, quoting from their own statements. Swearing, obscenities, scandalous and provocative language are important elements in the arsenal the grrrl zines throw at mainstream windows from their fringe. If your windows look in that direction, you might be wise to take shelter.

You have either Goddess Juice, from a group in Omaha ages 16-25, or Girl Friend, from a then first-year student at Hampshire College. Christina from Girl Friend says, in the inside cover, "i have to speak for me, i gotta gotta do it!" Goddess Juice says, in "A Letter to You from the Goddesses," "get involved and contribute so we can build a movement together here in Omaha based on communication love and support for each other as wimmin." Other zines announce a purpose more emphatically. Aim Your Dick's "political statement," placed on the inside front cover like an editorial statement, is a list of 63 imperatives, in wholly parallel verb phrases, beginning with "fuck racism" and continuing with noun complements like "homophobia," "meat-eating," "planetary destruction," "ignorance," "profit,"

"crackheads," "dumb-ass liberals from Santa Barbara," and so on. The rhetoric of lists in short parallel imperatives is ubiquitous in this genre.

The Wick, by two high school grrrls from Miami, Florida, also has a statement of purpose. "Why go to all this trouble? You ask. We wondered why too. Wick has no great deep purpose except that modern suburbia high school can make one feel trapped, as you probably know. We wanted our own voices, however small, to be heard." We can see the style of the literacies of the humanities in the medial modifier "however small."

Poser #8, the "Holy Homophobia" issue, says in a letter with the salutation, "Dear Reader": "The reason we're doing this issue with a homophobic theme is because we're really sick of the people around us being homophobic... . We don't claim to be the all knowing on gay issues, we just want to get our message out, whether we're gay or not." Again, we can see our own literacy in the correctly contracted, "we're."

In the first issue of Jaded, May says, "What I wanted to do with this zine is create dialogue where I thought dialogue was lacking, express myself and show my art. I also want my zine to inspire people & be an outlet for fellow artists." Lastly, in Disco Fred's Got a Vasectomy," Alison says, "I'm thousands of miles away from all the people I love and who inspire me. I didn't tell people I was doing this zine because I'm too much of a freak to deal with expectations. I have no idea what I'm

doing. I wrote this for myself but now everyone gets to read it."

So by their own claims, the grrrl-zine publishers want to be heard, want to find others, want to build community, want to reassure and be reassured. They also want to throw stones through windows. A slogan that shows up over and over is "fuck shit up." Exhorting each other to do something! is an element of almost all of the grrrl zines.

With a deeply oral transition here then, let me ask: How do zines relate to mainstream media; particularly, how do the grrrl zines relate to the mainstream magazines written with their age group in mind? Here's where I answer the question of the title: "How Sassy Are Grrrl Zines?" a question I no longer find very interesting. Sassy is aware of zines, with a "zine of the month" featured in each issue. Zines are very aware of Sassy. This awareness is not comfortable. How sassy are grrrl zines? The answer is "not very"--if Sassy magazine is the model of sass. In Lizard Music, Soo Berry has a rant called, "Let's Bash Thrasher, Suck Off Sassy":

> sassy...has glossed over articles about tatoos and piercings and all the cool things for a teenager. its great that they can present more liberal ideas than their other magazine counterparts... . [I] just think skinny, unrealistic portrayals of womyn is not feminist, just like all those modern womyn mags who are supposedly pro-choice, supposedly with womyn's interests in mind, but they too are chock full of ads the sublime portrayer of ideals that focus on cosmetic surgery, air brushed anorexic models. i don't even know why i even have to address...such [a] popular mag as Sassy...to an alternative audience who wouldn't support such shit, but i've come to realize that

> "alternative" has become popularized, diluted, and put side by side with traditional reactionary values.

It's Sassy's sexist representations of girls and its dilution of alternative culture through its commodification of it that offends the grrrl zine publishers. Sassy's "zine of the month" is simply one way it commodifies alternative culture.

A rant called "Who's Choking or Dying?" in Riot Grrrl NYC says about Sassy's sexist representations:

> That's where the trouble begins with Sassy, their format of visuals is the same as all other magazines with a female audience - thin, VERY attractive models AND the "Lose weight so boys will like you" advertisement in the back.
>
> My roomate disagrees with my disgust towards Sassy, she argues that they write good articles about incest survivors, rape, witchcraft, how to make clothes, etc... [elipsis dots in original] Alright - all well and good, except the articles are the substance of bubble gum icecream with the cherry being 'cute band alert." yes - too stupid to even MENTION, "cute band alert" degrades any woman who takes her music seriously... .
>
> Perhaps I am in a dream world with my desire to have articles and pictures of the average girl growing up in cheap discount clothes amidst her piles of souvenirs, collectibles, memories, dreams and books that she always carries close to her imagined too large/too small chest.

Kablooie #1, from Merion Station, Pennsylvania, rants on Sassy's commodification of alternative culture:

> Be-bellbottommed, choker-wearing, temporarily-tattooed teenage girls across the country wave their copies [of Sassy] in the air and proclaim, "I can reveal my true self now! It's cool to be alternative!"... If I sound resentful, it's because I am. It used to be that, if a girl rejected the boy-crazy, make-up and hairspray mainstream world represented by magazines like Seventeen, she found acceptance in alternative culture... . Then came Sassy, which, while claiming to give a voice to girls who didn't fit the popular standard, actually just clothed those same old

> standards in all the trappings that alternative girls had been using to identify themselves. Now the models sport noserings, the trendy clothes are $60 flannels, and we should still spend hours grooming ourselves, as long as it's with politically correct, outrageously-priced Body Shop products.

These attitudes to Sassy accord with those of T.C. Frank in an article in Pulp: The University of Chicago Journal of Analysis, Comment, and Review, to get one properly academic citation in here. Frank says, in "Sass Sells: The Teen Rebel as Model Consumer,"

> The hero of the Sassy world is, of course, the teen rebel cast in an unseemly new role: as model consumer, a daring patron of the latest styles, as assassin of the old, as liberator of our commodity lust. She figures in both ads and texts, eternally mouthing off to those imaginary authority figures...who would have her conform, be thrifty, dress dull, dress preppy. (1)

The grrrl zines reject more than sexism and resent more than the coopting of alternative culture. They also reject mainstream understandings of intellectual property. Aim Your Dick has an "@nticopyright": "Go ahead & reprint & copy stuff if you want cuz ideas & information are free and priceless." Wick has a page of "Stuff We Wish We Wrote," with paragraphs from Teddy Roosevelt and George Sand, among others. Persons are attributed; actual sources, the bar codes, are not. When She Was Good includes a photocopy of a messenger service ad, complete with a bad photocopy of the photograph, and a hand-written note saying that the woman quoted in the ad is the "singer for Tribe 8." No source is cited. Poser #8 says, "A lot of the gay info was

photocopied out of the book 'Our Bodies, Ourselves.'" Kablooie says:

> Fuck Copyrights. [We] deeply feel it is [our] obligation to convey important information to you. Whether this important information comes from a published author or your pet goldfish doesn't matter a bit. If bureaucracy did not exist and people could actually get things done, maybe we would meticulously contact each & every one of [our] sources. but probably not. If anyone uses stuff from this particular zine, that's fine. Just don't say you wrote it. That's dumb.

The grrrls of the grrrl zines clearly feel empowered in ways other teen-agers and 20-somethings, not to mention doctoral candidates, often do not; they feel empowered to use information and stylistically pleasing statements that are culturally available to them, regardless of legal issues surrounding intellectual property. Their zine production and circulation carries out that empowerment in an important way.

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When I attend 4 C's, one agenda I always have to a greater or lesser degree is to make note of anything I want to revise into my syllabus. Here is a genre that empowers, one in which young women are questioning and rejecting sacred cows like materialism, TV watching, and the commodification of culture. How can I, you might be wondering, use this genre in my classroom? Well, I don't want you to. I don't want to. If you break windows from inside occupied institutions, you get punished. And grrrl zine writers are not seeking punishment.

Like young Irv breaking a window in a deserted farmhouse, they are frightened, but they really want to get away with it. The empowerment of this genre is too forceful and too intense for our classrooms, for my classroom. It uses text for collective social action against injustice. I think that text so intended has to move more freely than we can tolerate in the classroom--even in the college classroom. We could only import this genre by taming its conventions, by making it a different genre, by coopting its intensity and power.

[put transparency of the following zine page on screen]

i am recovering from codependency on my mom, who has suffered years of abuse, more verbal/psychological than physical, from a yuppie fucker named J[redacted] F[redacted] W[redacted]. i have always felt obsessively protective of my mom, and believed that i was the only one who could help her. all the helping i did didn't do much except make me deeply frustrated, angry, depressed, and resentful... things are being worked out now, but J[redacted] is desperately trying to maintain control over her and make it as hard as possible to untangle ourselves from his fucking life. he even managed to get my mom arrested. (the police themselves, as lying, sexist bastards, had a lot to do with it).
Feel free to call J[redacted]. His number is [redacted]-[redacted]-[redacted]. Leave a message, and make sure you say you're a riot grrrl cuz he's scared of it (gee i wonder why?) Once he practically BRIBED me to be silent about him by offering to donate MONEY to riot grrrl. FUCK YOU J[redacted]! HOPE YOU FUCKING DIE IN YOUR YUPPIE FORTRESS.
-A[redacted] ([redacted]-[redacted])
P.S. I love my mom.

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Zines Quoted

Because zines tend to be nonce publications, I have listed the titles and cities of origin but not full addresses for ordering. Three sources for finding currently available zines are listed at the end of this section.

Aim Your Dick, Berkeley, CA

Disco Fred's Got a Vasectomy, Amherst, MA

Girl Friend, Amherst, MA

Goddess Juice, Omaha, NE

Jaded, Arlington, VA

Kablooie #1, Merion Station, PA

Lizard Music, Allston, MA

Poser #8, Hampton, NH

Riot Grrrl NYC, New York City, NY

The Wick, Miami, FL

When She Was Good, Sand Springs, OK

Sources for Currently Available Zines

Action Girl Newsletter. Send two stamps to: Sarah, 543 Duzer St., Staten Island, NY 10304. A 2-4 page review of zines produced by girls.

Factsheet 5. Each issue is about 100 pages of zine reviews classified by their primary topics. It is available at newsstands, by mail from Factsheet Five Subscriptions, P.O. Box 170099, San Francisco, CA 94117-0099, or by anonymous ftp at etext.archive.umich.edu in /Pub/Factsheet.Five or via gopher client with gopher gopher.well.sf.cs.us. E-mail subscriptions are also available.

riot grrrl press catalogue. Send $1.00 to RGPress, POBox 1375, Arlington, VA 22210. 10-15 pages of reviews of riot grrrl and riot-grrrl type zines.